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Remembering to Heal: The Boat, spiral time and other decolonial unearthings

ESSAY ABSTRACT

This essay builds on the author's spectatorship of the monumental performance installation, *O Barco/The Boat*, by Grada Kilomba, during its opening in Lisbon on September 3, 2021.

Drawing inspiration from that work, the essay explores the concepts of spiral time and orality, as presented in Leda Maria Martins' scholarship within performance studies, culminating in the introduction of the notion of decolonial unearthings. The text further presents how the idea was coined in the context of the author's practice, research, and archive.

The development of decolonial unearthings as a conceptual tool is supported in the study of European colonial history, especially the transatlantic traffic of enslaved people and Afro-diaspora Orisha mythology. Unearthing and remembering are thus regarded as steps toward the healing of colonial wounds.

INTRODUCTION

This short essay intends to dive into the work of multimedia artist Grada Kilomba, namely her monumental performance installation *O Barco/The Boat* (2021), which opened on September 3, 2021. Through traveling in my memories of that event, the following writings connect that artwork with its multiple narrative layers, visual, kinesthetic, and aural elements, to the notions of spiral time and oralities, coined by the scholar Leda Maria Martins.

Furthermore, I exercise a new concept, called decolonial unearthings, forged in the core of my performance practice through the reencounter with my professional archive and my work with the research project *Estuaries: Decolonial, Feminist, Afro Diaspora Perspectives on Performance*, developed at the Faculty of Fine Arts at The University of Agder, Norway, from 2019 to 2023.





Grada Kilomba Performance, Boca, 2021. Photo: Bruno Simao.

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By Deise Faria Nunes

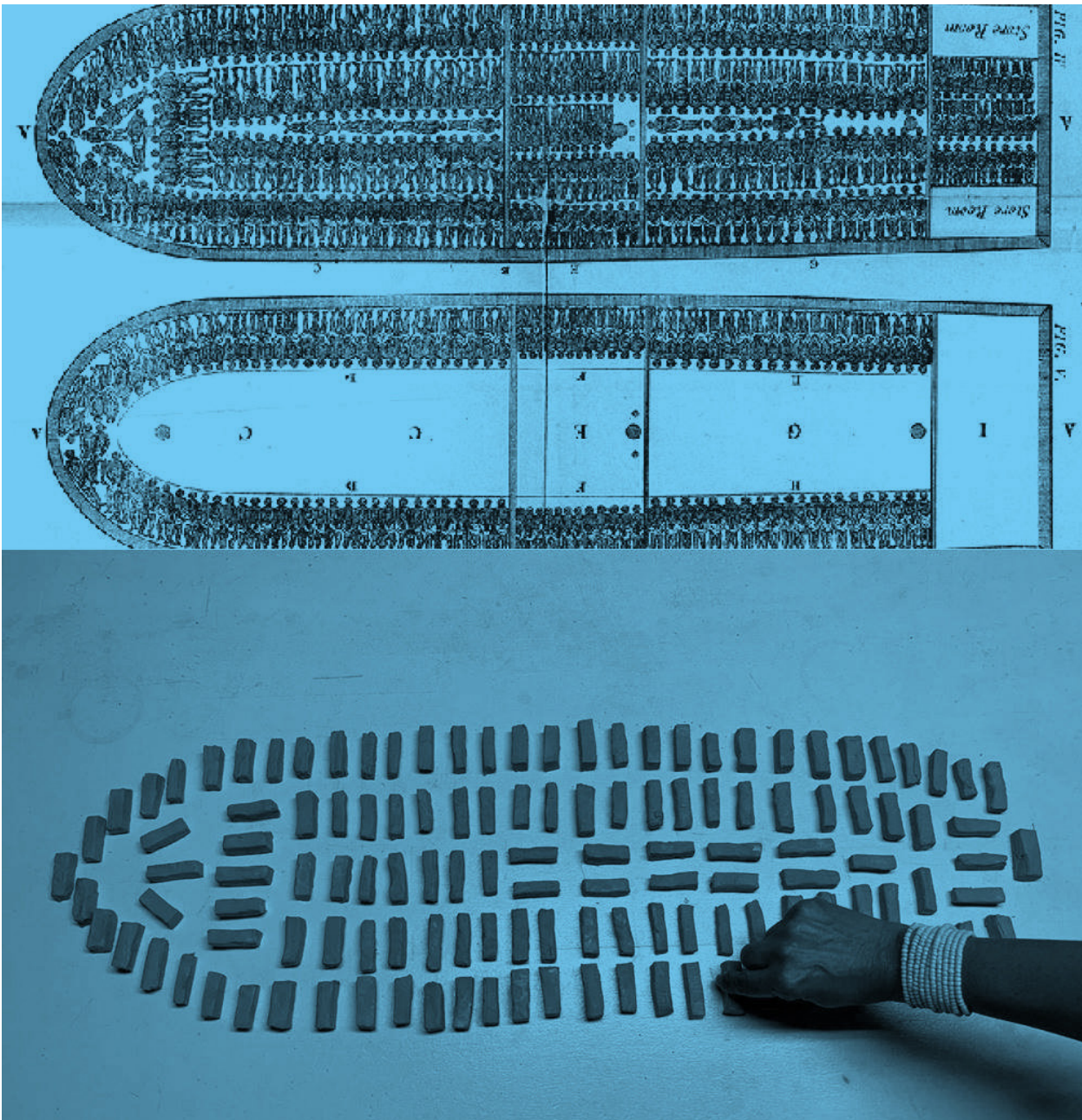
Belém, Lisbon area. It is the end of a hot, late summer afternoon. By the northern bank of the Tagus, in the area around the estuary where it meets the Atlantic, an intriguing installation has attracted what looks like more than two hundred people, who gather around it in the area between the MAAT, the Museum of Architecture, Art, and Technology, and the Electricity Museum. In this building, the coal used to produce electricity for the city was stored in the past. The place is known as Coal Square, Praça do Carvão.

An Ancestral Ceremony by the Tagus

There is a contrast, or perhaps a tension in the area's atmosphere, something hard to define. The promenade by that river bank is usually popular among tourists, especially at that location, close to emblematic landmarks such as the Belém Tower and the Monument to the Discoveries, two places directly connecting to Portugal's colonial history.

The latter was built as a homage to Prince Henry the Navigator, the masted behind the so-called Portuguese maritime expansion (Bandeira 2008/2001). One of the most visited places around Lisbon, it carries signs of the history of the relationship between colonialism and the over four-decade-long totalitarian regime symbolized by the figure of the dictator António de Oliveira Salazar (1889 – 1970).

Kilomba describes the surrounding monuments as phallic, patriarchal, and feeding a childish narrative about colonialism (Kilomba 2021). However, the people around Coal Square in that luminous late afternoon are not there to see those landmarks. They are spectators awaiting the start of the opening show of *O Barco/The Boat*, an interdisciplinary, monumental installation and performance created by Grada Kilomba for the BOCA Biennial.



The abovementioned installation comprises one hundred and forty pieces of burnt wood spread over thirty-two meters along the square. The black, rectangular cuboid blocks are carefully placed, intentionally reproducing the form of the bottom of a ship. The blocks seem solid and heavy as if each of them contained the weight of a history that Kilomba wants to expose. They are the agents

of the tension or contrast present in the space and can be seen as the objects of a time shift. Artifacts of the spiral time. I will come back to this concept later. However, some of the blocks have words engraved in gold. Words from a poem of eighteen verses in several languages: Yoruba, Kimbundu, Creole, Setswana, Portuguese, English, and Arabic.

“Kilomba describes the surrounding monuments as phallic, patriarchal, and feeding a childish narrative about colonialism (Kilomba 2021).”

The poem reads:

O Barco / The Boat

One boat one cargo hold

One cargo hold one load

One load one story

One story one piece

One piece one life

One life one body

One body one person

One person one being

One being one soul

One soul one memory

One memory one oblivion

One oblivion one wound

One wound one death

One death one sorrow

One sorrow one revolution

One revolution one equality

One equality one affection

One affection Humanity

(Kilomba 2021)





Grada Kilomba Performance, Boca, 2021. Photo: Bruno Simao.

For Kilomba, crafting the installation was a beautiful, personal process, full of symbolism:

It is almost a performative process of making holes on the ground, burning the wood, putting the wood in water, on fire, in the air, fire, water, in the sea, in the air. It is a whole performance to transport it, to draw, to engrave the poem into the wood, to paint the poem in gold with syringes. (Kilomba 2021)

The installation is a complete entity, a rich expression in its own right, full of meanings and aesthetic layers, as the artist describes. That becomes more evident as a smaller version displaying only the wooden blocks engraved with the poem, titled 18 verses, was created in 2022 and curated as a separate work for exhibitions in London (Goodman 2023) and New York (Pace 2023).

Nonetheless, *The Boat* has another fundamental dimension: A performance created by Kilomba alongside a choir of sixteen singers, two dancers, and four percussionists.

Their presences are dramaturgically established in the space by the amplified, rhythmically marked sound of their breathing for long minutes. Carried through the physical structure by music and the mantra-text for about one hour, their bodies perform a rite that can be interpreted in many ways.

The poem, the installation, and the performance were created to reflect on the transatlantic traffic of enslaved people and the genocide of Africans in Abya Yala, exposing our colonial wound. In *The Boat*, several layers of meaning intertwine: the moving black bodies, the voices of the choir, and the poem sung in a call-and-response that becomes more and more immersive as the performers enter deeper into the installation. The researcher Cristina Roldão sees the event as a funeral ceremony (Kilomba 2021). If we let the imagination expand on that idea, it would be possible to think of the black-dressed performers as African ancestral beings who emerged from the Tagus to visit and tell us their stories. Their moving, hum-

ming, reciting presences can reveal a deep sense of reparation, echoing voices from ships, plantations, and shacks.

An Event of the Spiral Time

The Boat carries elements that inscribe it in a series of recent art projects with the Afro-diasporic Atlantic as a site of memory and potential cultural reparation (MASP 2018). Applying Afro-Brazilian Orishala mythologies as a lens to approach performance and the arts (Faria Nunes 2011), the entire multilayered work suggests a dialogue with sacred entities of the crossroads, earth, water, and fire. For example, we can contemplate Eshu, the propitiator energy related to the transmutation of matter, to portals, streets, and roads, especially their points of intersection, which are physical and existential crossroads where choices of paths are made. The location of the performance is itself part of a crossroad and a portal, from which the Atlantic is seen as a path into multiple geography-events, geography-deeds, and geography-af-



Grada Kilomba Performance, Boca, 2021. Photo: Bruno Simao.

facts: violence, greed, destruction, resistance, appropriations, syncretism, worship, re-birth, and fight for reparations.

The space around the installation is reminiscent of a dock to which a ghost boat has returned to tell European colonial history from a different perspective. At one point, the performers seem to have risen from the burnt wood pieces, and the voices gain several dimensions. The performance can be experienced as a collective healing ritual that breaks the walls of the boat wreck, revealing the past, present, and future.

Through ritual, that impactful event by the Tagus expresses the abovementioned idea of spiral time, a concept coined by Leda Maria Martins in *Performances do Tempo Espiral* (2021). In her book, Martins develops the concept that she also calls *chronosophies* in spirals. *Chronosophia* and *chronosophy* are neologisms created by J.T. Fraser by juxtaposing the Greek words *chronos*, which means “time,” and *sophia*, “knowledge.” Fraser described *chronosophia* as a more or less inherent sense of what time is, as he defines *chronosophy* as “the interdisciplinary and normative study of time sui generis.” (Fraser 1981). As a concept in the field of performance studies, spiral time rests upon Afro-diasporic spirituality and ancestor worship.

For Martins, our access to ancestry and the performances connected to it are characterized by a recurrent time (Martins 2021). One example of this notion is the fact that in the ritual of the *xirê* in Brazilian *Candomblé Ketu*, the devotees dance in a circle that moves anti-clockwise, in a movement back in time, to invoke the divinized African ancestors, the *Orishas* (Faria Nunes 2011). In this context, time is always moving back and forth, returning to mythological narratives that are continuously re-danced and reenacted, in what Richard Schechner called “twice behaved behavior” (Schechner and Turner 1985).

Martins deepens:

The idea that time, in certain cultures, is a place of inscription

of a knowledge that is written in gesture, movement, choreography, on the surface of the skin, as well as in the rhythms and timbres of vocality; knowledge that is framed by a certain cosmoperception and philosophy. (...) the design of a time that curves back and forth, simultaneously, always in the process of prospecting and retrospection, memory and becoming[.] Spiraling is what, in my understanding, best illustrates this perception, conception and experience. (Martins 2021)

For the scholar, the visible is inseparable from the invisible. Thus, the time of the ancestors cannot be separated from our time or from the future time of our descendants, as all of them are inhabited by a vital force that secures the continuity of life. In *The Boat*, such power is amplified, dilated, and elaborated in a healing process I call decolonial unearthing.

Decolonial Unearthings (By Means of Performance)

To investigate decolonial unearthings, I consider it fundamental to understand oraliture, another idea presented by Leda Maria Martins in *Performances of the Spiral Time*.

Oraliture can be defined as a performance studies concept that seeks to blur the hierarchical dichotomy between writing and orality (Martins 2021). Through the understanding of different expressions of performance as oraliture, it is possible to study their elements as components of an indivisible texture composed of bodily movement, spoken, recited, sung, or prayed words, as well as the ritualization of various materials and objects.

Decolonial unearthings are conceptual approaches coined in the context of my doctoral research project *Estuaries: Decolonial, Feminist, Afro-Diaspora Perspectives on Performance*. It refers to using the Afro-diaspora or other post-colonial diaspora archives in oraliture events or processes that dig out specific moments or parts of history long hidden by colonial narratives. Decolonial unearthings carry an inherent paradox: they appear and are deeply needed in the violent contexts of

coloniality – the cultural, linguistic, and symbolic aspects of colonialism - and cannot be separated from it. They are nevertheless instruments of collective healing for diasporic communities.

The concept appeared during a personal process in which I revisited my entire artistic archive and reencountered my first solo performance, *Valongo* (Direction: Jan Ferslev, 2010). The piece, created during my studies and residencies at the *Odin Teatret* in *Holstebro*, Denmark, in 2009 and 2010, was deeply inspired by my fieldwork in *Rio de Janeiro* in 2008. There, I visited the site of a mass grave for enslaved people, known as the *Valongo Cemetery*, in the central area of *Rio*, part of which was unearthed during renovation work in the home of *Merced and Petruccio Guimarães dos Anjos*. The discovery made in 1996 was the object of many negotiations between the owners of the house and the cultural heritage authorities (*IPN NA*). That was the first event of a sizeable archeological finding revealed in 2011 that comprises the *Valongo* and the *Imperatriz wharves*, active as a transatlantic harbors and slave markets from 1811 to 1831. The piers are today sites recognized by *UNESCO* as *World Heritage* (*UNESCO 2023 (2017)*).

While I stand at *Coal Square* and watch *The Boat* unfold, I look back at the painful process of creating *Valongo* and my experience of that fieldwork. I sense the emotional labor of unearthing and the energy patterns from the old African Ancestral entities, the *Pretos Velhos*, whose mythology is very much informed by symbols of slavery and a myriad of ways in which the Black population resisted it.

Decolonial unearthings are saturated with a clear intention of healing or reparation, something I attempted to carry out in my performance back in 2010, when in the final part, I buried a small fabric doll – made by my then eight years old daughter – in a slot of earth created on the floor onstage, formed as the map of Africa.

As oralitures, decolonial unearthings are events that happen by means



From the O Barco, The boat, documentary, 2021.

of performances of the spiral time, phenomena that can initially be described as or similar to performing and live arts, ritual traditions and community manifestations, play, games, or social events and that seem to carry in themselves concrete aspects of different time experiences and multilayered forms of knowledge. They may be based on collective or individual lived experiences, heritages, memories, legacies, or archives; they can be (auto-)biographical or (auto-)ethnographic.

Conclusion

In this short essay, I intended to launch my first reflection on the concept of decolonial unearthings and how it appeared in my practice, research, and archive experiences. To better understand and investigate some of the limits of the idea, I elaborated on my spectatorship of the monumental performance instal-

lation O Barco/The Boat, by Grada Kilomba, on the opening day, in early September 2021.

“I sense the emotional labor of unearthing and the energy patterns from the old African Ancestral entities, the Pretos Velhos, whose mythology is very much informed by symbols of slavery and a myriad of ways in which the Black population resisted it.

In the summer of 2022, in the convergence of a series of life events that led me to revisit my entire professional archive, I discovered a conceptual tool that allowed me to go back to art experiences such as that of The Boat and understand their multiple dimensions, seen through energy patterns based in the study of Afro-diaspora mythology and the concepts of spiral time and orature, informed by Leda Maria Martins' work.

I hope that the decolonial perspectives delineated in these writings may contribute to understanding experiences where the African diaspora's historical colonial wounds are re-visited, scrutinized, re-told, and re-signified by their own political subjects.

We unearth and remember to heal.

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